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Donor Profile: Connie and Alan Buerger

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Realizing — and Supporting — Potential

Through their personal experience, Connie and Alan Buerger choose to support minimally invasive surgery at Ryan Hospital

BY HELEN RADENKOVIC

In October of 2010 Connie Buerger brought her beloved 11-year-old Portuguese water dog, Max, to Penn Vet's Ryan Hospital to have a group of masses growing on his left shoulder evaluated. One of the reasons Connie brought Max to Ryan Hospital was because her daughter-in-law, and Penn Vet Overseer, Krista Buerger, had shared with her the excellent care her own Portuguese water dog, Kobe, had received just a year before.

Connie and her husband, Alan, founded Coventry, the creator and leader of the secondary life insurance market. Their son, Reid, and daughter-in-law, Krista, both work in the family business. Connie and Alan live in the Philadelphia suburbs, dividing their time between their business, philanthropy and their growing family – Krista just gave birth to their second grandchild. Connie and Alan are both true animal lovers. When he was a young boy, Alan's family raised and showed collies. While Connie did not grow up with dogs, she always wanted one, so as soon as it was possible, she and Alan took in three beautiful Portuguese water dogs: Max, Chance and Dash.

That October visit at Ryan Hospital revealed that Max had myxofibrosarcoma, an aggressive soft-tissue cancer. After receiving this tough news, Connie placed her confidence – and Max's life – into the expert hands of Ryan Hospital's surgery and oncology teams. With David Holt, BVSc, professor of surgery, and Lili Duda, VMD, Dipl. ACVR, adjunct associate professor of radiation oncology, on his team, Max had the best chance at fighting and defeating his cancer. Max's surgery to remove three cancerous masses from his shoulder was a success, but he still required a full course of radiation therapy. Between March and August of 2011 Max and Connie became daily visitors to Ryan Hospital's Rosenthal Imaging and Treatment Center (RITC) where he received the ongoing treatments he needed. His friendly, playful disposition quickly made Max one of Ryan Hospital's favorite patients, and to everyone's great relief and delight on September 13, 2011 he received a clean bill of health – no small feat for an 11-year-old dog.

During her many hours in the RITC waiting room, Connie had an opportunity to get to know Ryan



Connie Buerger pictured with Max, her 11-year-old Portuguese water dog.

PHOTO BY WILLOW STREET PICTURES (WWW.WILLOWSTREETPICTURES.COM)

Hospital well and was immediately impressed by the expertise, compassion and dedication of each clinician and staff member to improve the health and quality of life of pets. She even found that parking attendant Sly was always ready to help find Connie and Max a parking spot close to the RITC entrance so that Max would not have to walk too far to receive his treatment.

And what really made Connie start to think about veterinary medicine and its role in preserving the human-animal bond was learning about Ryan Hospital's construction of a new minimally invasive surgery suite.

This minimally invasive surgery suite would be the first of its kind at any veterinary teaching hospital and offer an impressive variety of minimally invasive surgery techniques, such as arthroscopy, endoscopy, laparoscopy, thoracoscopy, minimally invasive fracture repair and interventional radiology. It would be the next leap in the care available to pets – the benefits of minimally invasive surgery were very clear to Connie and Alan – less chance of infection, a significantly shorter recovery time and significantly less pain for pets. An important component to Ryan Hospital's plans for the minimally invasive surgery suite that resonated with Connie and Alan was that Ryan Hospital clinicians also hoped to offer these benefits of less infections, shorter recovery

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thorough, determined and dedicated to his research as Ralph.”

“Of course, my primary interest remains to understand the biology of the mammalian germ line, and secondarily, to determine how the germ line can be manipulated to improve the health and life of animals and man,” said Dr. Brinster. Major questions remain and of course always will. “How can we use transgenesis, stem cells, and the germ line to cure human disease? How does an animal develop from a single cell? This is an amazing process. If we can alter the process to cure disease, that would be a powerful and wonderful outcome.”

“I am incredibly proud of Ralph,” said Joan C. Hendricks, the Gilbert S. Kahn Dean of Veterinary Medicine. “He is undoubtedly the top veterinary scientist in the world, especially if you consider his sustained excellence and demonstrated brilliance over at least five decades, and he is one of the top biomedical scientists anywhere. Penn Vet is thrilled that we are able to count Dr. Brinster as one of our own brilliant scientists.”

Still, Dr. Brinster remains humble.

“The actual advance in science is immortal. When I am gone, the information and science will remain and continue to be important to the future of mankind,” said Dr. Brinster. “Throughout the years I have worked with many talented students, colleagues and collaborators who have been both brilliant and hard-working. I have just been around and kept the focus on germ cells, the germ line and genes. And of course, luck has been on our side.” 

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times and less pain to members of the shelter animal medicine community. They would provide spays for those animals still looking for their forever homes, but needed a fund from which to subsidize these procedures.

Having seen what advanced medical technology combined with the best clinical expertise can accomplish, Connie and Alan decided to give a naming gift to complete the construction of the minimally invasive surgery suite, and also to start an endowment that would enable Ryan Hospital clinicians to perform minimally invasive spays on some of the most deserving patients, shelter animals. Seven years in the planning, this dream for what better care would be available for pets became a reality because of Connie and Alan’s generosity and love of animals.

Since its opening on October 3, 2011 – a year after Max’s first visit to Ryan Hospital – The Buerger Family Foundation Minimally Invasive Surgery Suite has served many routine and some extremely challenging cases. The suite has also become a hub for exchanging knowledge and advancing current veterinary medicine procedures and its teleconferencing capabilities permit remote consultations and broader teaching opportunities as far away as the Veterinary School in Azabu, Japan, among others.

When Connie, Alan, Reid and Krista came to visit The Buerger Family Surgery Suite after its opening, they experienced first-hand the gratitude and excitement of all Ryan Hospital communities. Alan remarked that Penn Vet’s Ryan Hospital has always been there to make sure that their dogs, which they deem members of their family, received the best, compassionate care and that they were thrilled to support such a prodigious institution.

Krista and Reid’s own philanthropy to support the oncology section at Ryan Hospital, and Krista’s leadership on the Penn Vet Board of Overseers, have contributed immensely to Penn Vet. Ryan Hospital is fortunate to have friends like Connie, Alan, Reid and Krista – they help to ensure Penn Vet’s leadership position in the field of veterinary medicine. 